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ABSTRACT

Contrary to recent observations about an excessively vocational orientation, programs in foreign languages for business are not limited to narrow career goals. The syllabus design readily accommodates concerns for transmitting culture, examining the civilizing heritage, and leading students to self-understanding. The subject matter is different, but the principles remain the same. For example, the study of the economy of another country, even at a superficial level, necessitates taking into account numerous cultural aspects; a study of current international economic relations requires considering the historical background against which these relations are evolving; the attempt to define, characterize, and understand the way peoples manage their economic resources is as likely to lead to self-understanding as traditional subject matter areas; practical exercises such as writing a job application require students to reflect on their own qualifications as well as prospective employers' background, needs, and cultural setting; analysis of economic trends and public policy enhances understanding of oneself and one's relationship to other cultures. The foreign language for business program, while leading to specific career goals, also transmits culture, reveals a civilizing heritage, and leads to increased individual self-realization. (MSE)

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10 Foreign Languages for Business: Career or Culture?

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In mid-October, 1984, a report prepared for the Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell, and the National Institute of Education declared, "The college curriculum has become excessively vocational in its orientation, and the bachelor's degree has lost its potential to foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society."[1]

In foreign languages, where the traditional career application of study has been teaching, a decline in demand for teachers has led to the search for new applications. Among the new directions, foreign languages for business has had considerable success in drawing increased enrollments and training people skilled in a foreign language and knowledgeable about international economic relations. This field differs from the traditional subject areas of foreign language study, namely, literature and linguistics, and explores such topics as economic policy, advertising, and trade barriers. The field has received professional recognition by the establishment of standing committees in such organizations as AATG and AATSP and in a policy statement from ADFL. But the argument still arises that the new focus is too narrow and oriented toward limited career goals. There is the uneasy feeling that cultural values are ignored, an understanding of civilizing heritage lost, and the precious goal of self-understanding will go unattained. In short, this new field is seen as a betrayal of the humanistic tradition of foreign language teaching.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that programs in foreign languages for business are not limited to narrow career goals. The syllabus design readily accommodates concerns for transmitting culture,

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examining the civilizing heritage, and leading students to self-understanding. The subject matter is necessarily different, but the principles remain the same.

Culture

Learning another culture has long been a part of the humanities curriculum. The most important step in undertaking this task is coming to grips with the language of that culture. In ancient Rome, aspirants to higher learning had to know Greek; in the Middle Ages, Latin was the learned language; today many colleges and universities require a modern foreign language. Experts in the business world today acknowledge that language is the key to international enterprise. In his book on *The Cultural Environment of International Business*, Vern Terpstra[2] places his chapter on language at the very beginning, emphasizing the importance of dealing with the target language for anyone interested in doing business abroad.

While language is a prime vehicle for transmitting culture, the study of the economy of another country, even at a superficial level, necessitates taking into account numerous cultural aspects. A brief example is the current move toward regional development in France. A discussion of the twenty-two economic regions requires an understanding of the changes from provincial to departmental structure that occurred during the Revolution. The present return to regions recalls names and territories of the old provinces. In order to comprehend the role of government in French economic matters, one must refer to the historical development of that involvement, which reaches back at least as far as Louis XIV's minister J.-B. Colbert. Advertising is another area rich in cultural contrast. Beyond the humorous blunders that have stymied many export projects (and make good copy for convention speakers), there is the serious concern for what a given culture will find worthwhile and attractive in a given product and its marketing campaign.[3] This can have ethical ramifications, as seen in the recently successful campaign to require the Nestlé company to change its marketing of substitute milk products in underdeveloped countries.

Civilizing Heritage

The liberal arts tradition has long turned to the humanities to provide a body of recorded human achievement that will give each new generation an understanding that can guide new endeavors and prevent the repetition of past disasters. Traditionally a wide variety of literary and historical works has provided material. The core of the liberal arts curriculum has had some coherence based on the areas of study (history, philosophy, the arts, literature, social sciences). But within these areas there has always been considerable flexibility regarding specific works, genres, and even traditions that are to be studied. The relative importance in time and value attributed to each area has varied. If we introduce into this array, through the medium of foreign languages for business, a study of current international economic relations, it is still necessary to consider the historical background against which these relations are evolving. While the difficulties of the European Economic Community and the Council of Europe are known and may lead to amendment of present agreements, it is crucial to reflect on the nationalistic rivalries of 50 and 75 years ago in order to understand the fundamental desire among participating countries to find mutually agreeable solutions.

Self-Understanding

If an increase in self-understanding is a valued outcome of liberal education, the foreign language for business curriculum represents a worthy path toward that goal. By virtue of its concentration on both skill in a foreign language and the subject matter treated, it can lead to a greater realization of human achievement and potential. Such a program is a challenge to mature in reflective activity as well as in relations with others in the community.

It is no secret to foreign language teachers that the elementary and intermediate levels induce learners to reflect on the workings of their native language; this can lead to valuable insights into the nature of human communication and to an understanding of one's own abilities in relations with others. When the threshold of communicative competence is crossed, however, and the content of learning activities becomes more important, the potential for debate over which subjects are worthwhile increases.

Here an argument needs to be made for the liberating influence of business studies.

The attempt to define, characterize, and understand the way peoples manage their economic resources is as likely to lead to self-understanding as the traditional subject matter areas. Comprehending the potential for catastrophic disaster as well as for creative success that human economic initiative can achieve is an objective that fosters self-understanding. Considering two concrete events, the job application and the vote, will demonstrate how practical and humanistic goals are intertwined.

The job application, whether done as an exercise or in earnest, requires an inventory of the applicant's qualifications as well as an anticipation of the prospective employer's background and needs. Drafting a letter of application for a real or imaginary internship challenges the student to demonstrate an awareness of current directions in world commerce, some knowledge of a prospective employer's place in that trend, and an understanding of the cultural setting in which the prospective employer operates. Most important, an assessment of the qualities and skills that he or she might offer requires the student to reflect on personal attributes as compared to societal needs. While it is true that a prospective employer may have tasks for the student intern that do not correspond to the range of concepts learned in the classroom, nevertheless, the intelligent presentation of a candidate's qualities and comprehension of economic realities will draw the prospective employer's attention. To carry out this exercise effectively requires profound self-understanding.

Exercise of the right to vote requires self-knowledge of a different order. Numerous issues of international relations are debated periodically at the national level and in the various states. Prominent people, including the President, governors, legislators, and jurists take public positions on issues such as trade barriers, trade policy, and economic assistance. In order to exercise the franchise intelligently, an individual must become aware not only of the needs of fellow citizens and the home society, but also of the cultures with which one competes. The argument that a competing country unfairly subsidizes certain sectors (e.g., steel, shoes, agriculture), might be offset by understanding that this is a traditional and necessary part of the way the culture functions.

It is important for students to be aware of economic trends in the home culture and how public policy translates these trends in international

economic relations. For example, the recent shift in the U.S. economy from the dominance of heavy industry to the prominence of the tertiary sector (services) makes it important to emphasize services in international relations. Until recently the U.S. balance of international payments rested mainly on trade in manufactured goods. Since 1975 there has been a deficit in trade with foreign countries. In the same period a large part of that deficit has been offset by a surplus in the exchange of services.[4] As this sector becomes even more important, it behooves the student to understand how other countries feel about importing more U.S. services and their reasons for or against accepting this.

Again, through dealing with these problems, an understanding of oneself and one's relationship to other cultures is enhanced. Business and economics are rich in material for mature reflection.

Conclusion

Since the Renaissance in the West, the notion has grown stronger that the humanities serve to develop the citizen.[5] It is this ideal that is served by a foreign language for business program, which, while it leads to specific career goals, still transmits culture, reveals a civilizing heritage, and leads to increased self-realization of the individual.

Notes

1. Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, as reported in Associated Press reports, October 16, 1984.
2. Vern Terpstra, ed., *The Cultural Environment of International Business* (Cincinnati, OH: South-Western Publishing Company, 1978).
3. H. A. Bouraoui, "L'Art publicitaire," Chapter 11 of *Créoculture* (Philadelphia: The Center for Curriculum Development, 1971), pp. 269-278.
4. Nicholas K. Kristof, "New Era in Service Exports?" *The New York Times*, vol. CXXXIV, no. 46, 207 (October 24, 1984), pp. 29-30.
5. Commission on the Humanities, *The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).

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